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AUTHOR Dana, Nancy Fichtman; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Consistent with educational reform efforts, this study examines traditional roles of teacher educators, university researchers, and public school personnel and addresses the following questions: (1) What role can the university play as change is initiated within public schools? (2) In order to create a culture for change, how must the traditional roles of university and public school personnel change? and (3) How does meaningful school and university collaboration develop? The participants, a teacher educator/researcher at The Florida State University and the teachers and principal at Sabal Palm Elementary School (Florida), engaged in a collaborative action research project. Interviews, journal entries, and field notes suggest that: building collaborative teams of teachers, administrators, and university faculty has tremendous potential to affect educational change and reform; building such teams means that the traditional relationship between university researchers, teacher educators, and school practitioners must be reconceptualized; and the collegiality and reflection experiences are not unlike the sharing that goes on in a family. The family metaphor evolved as a viable referent for exploring issues inherent in building university school collaboration as well as for establishing a school culture for change. (LL)

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Creating a Culture for Change: The University Researcher, Principal, and Teacher Family

Nancy Fichtman Dana

The Pennsylvania State University

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

James H. Pitts, Jr.

Elizabeth A. Hickey

Betty Rinehart

Sabal Palm Elementary School

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Creating A Culture For Change:

The University Researcher, Principal, and Teacher Family

Public education in the 1980's was characterized by cries for reform, restructure and change. The loudest cries have come from education, government, and business leaders (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986), and a consortium of education deans (The Holmes Group, 1986). In general, the reform documents produced by these leaders have envisioned a professional teaching environment in which the teacher assumes a decision-making and leadership role and has the opportunity for career advancement. Many educators have voiced reactions, modifications, and alternative visions of reform (Carroll, 1990; Futrell, 1989; Shanker, 1990; Timar, 1989; Weis, Altback, Kelly, Petrie, & Slaughter, 1989). Despite the abundance of literature suggesting visions for school change, as we begin the 1990s, Shanker (1990) asserts that "public education is still at the edge of disaster. Virtually every state and thousands of school districts have applied their favorite remedies to little avail" (p. 345).

The unsuccessful plight of school reform is most certainly not due to a lack of vision. Perhaps the answer to the reform question does not lie in the vision itself, but in the creators, developers, and owners of the vision. In the 1980s, reform visionaries have included government and business leaders, deans from major research-producing schools, and university professors from colleges of education in the United States. Ironically, this list of visionaries includes little representation from those who will be expected to implement and thus perhaps be most affected by change -- principals and classroom teachers.

Scholars now recognize the failure of top-down approaches to educational reform, a failure that may in part be due to the omission of teacher and principal voice from reform efforts (Barth, 1990; Deal, 1984; McDonald, 1990). Deal (1984) states:

> Practitioners at all levels, across sectors, have been trained and encouraged to look outside rather than within for solutions to problems, criteria for improvements, or directions for change. This is especially true in the public schools, where wave after wave of reform has weakened cultural values and beliefs, where constant criticism and ridicule have eroded professional confidence, where experience has been devalued in favor of youth, where main avenues of survival have been to hunker down, burn out or leave. All this fosters an attitude of looking outward and upward for direction and solutions . . . Excellence or improvement cannot be installed or mandated from outside; it must be developed from within. It must rise from collective conversations, behaviors, and spirit among teachers, administrators, students, and parents within a local school community. School improvement ought to be emphasized from within. (p. 136-137)

In order for practitioners inside the school to initiate change and self improvement, the traditional roles of those inside the school may need to change. For example, the traditional practice of looking to teacher educators and/or university researchers for school improvement "inservice training" or "consultations" may need to be augmented by practitioners looking to one another for school improvement ideas, reflections, and plans for action. Subsequently, the traditional role of teacher educators/university researchers may need to change from visiting schools to give "one shot" presentations on the latest educational innovation to developing long term collaborative relationships with the express purpose of facilitating school self improvement.

Many questions surface as public schools begin to initiate their own change and improvement and Universities seek to build long term collaborative relationships with schools to aid the change process. These questions include: (1) What role can the University play in change initiated from within the four walls of the school? (2) In order to create a culture for change, how must the traditional roles of university and public school personnel change? and (3) How does meaningful school and university collaboration develop?

Over the past two years, the authors of this paper (representing the teachers and administration of Sabal Palm Elementary School, as well as a teacher-educator/researcher at The Florida State University) have engaged in a collaborative action research project that has addressed these questions. Although the initial focus of our research was the examination and change of specific classroom practices through teacher reflection and action research (Schon, 1988; Carr & Kemmis, 1986), we learned that school improvement from within must begin with the creation of a school culture for change, as well as our own examinations of our roles as teacher, principal, and university researcher in relation to the change process. A description of our collaborative attempt to create a culture for change at Sabal Palm Elementary School is followed by our individual reflections on our changing roles as our collaborative action research progressed.

Creating a Culture for Change

Our work began on a warm summer afternoon in June of 1990. Members of the Leon County teaching and administration force attended a two day workshop on improving teaching in the elementary school given by Florida State University faculty. Following the workshop, the teachers and principal at Sabal Palm Elementary School approached Florida State with a request for help in improving their classroom practices and school. Sabal Palm's practitioners' interest in change coupled with a Florida State University researcher's interest in aiding change and documenting the process laid the foundation for our collaborative action research project (Dana, 1991).

The first phase of our study began with asking such questions as "What changes do we want to make?" and "What is our vision of school change?" Through analysis of transcribed tape recorded interviews and meetings with each other, as well as an examination of our own journal entries and field note accounts, we discovered that each member of the

faculty voiced a feeling of isolation and seclusion. As each grade level not only ate lunch together, but was housed in its own wing, attended special area classes together at approximately the same times each day, and were grouped together by the administration as a "team," teachers were isolated from faculty members who taught on grade levels other than their own. Even when teachers did have an opportunity to converse with peers who taught other grades (for example, at faculty meetings), the norm was to be seated at a table with others from the same grade level.

The importance of a culture of collegiality has been well documented by educational theorists such as Little (1981), Lieberman (1988), Joyce (1990) and Barth (1990). Our visions of culture change further support these theorists and Barth's assertion that:

> . . . the problem of how to change things from "I" to "we," of how to bring a good measure of collegiality and relatedness to adults who work in schools, is one that belongs on the national agenda of school improvement -- at the top. It belongs at the top because the relationships among adults in schools are the basis, the precondition, the *sine qua non* that allow, energize, and sustain all other attempts at school improvement. Unless adults talk with one another, observe one another, and help one another, very little will change. (p. 32)

Subsequently, we focused our efforts on creating a school culture conducive to continual change and self improvement. We envisioned Sabal Palm as a place where teachers voice their ideas, value the knowledge created through dialogue with their peers, and act on that knowledge by voicing support for one another.

We began our collegiality campaign with a survey indicating teacher interest in observing others' classrooms. The results of the our survey were overwhelmingly positive, and further supported the need for collegiality. We addressed that need by organizing a portion of faculty meetings for idea sharing and discussions of professional issues. Each member of the faculty (including the principal and university researcher) was assigned to a group containing peers who taught on different grade levels. Throughout the year, 15 to 20 minutes of faculty meetings were devoted to small and large group sharing on such topics as "Share a classroom management idea" and "Discuss the role of special programs at Sabal Palm."

Evidence to support that the culture of isolation was indeed changing to a culture of collegiality was evident in the cooperative working relationships that developed between teaching peers. The culture change was best summarized by one teacher's comment made during the last month of the 1990-91 school year, "We became more of a team this year than we've ever been."

Becoming Team Players:
Reflections on Changes in our Traditional Roles

The Teacher Educator/University Researcher.

The intent of my research with the teachers and principal at Sabal Palm was to engage in Schon's notion of reflective practice (Schon, 1988). Reflective supervision, or coaching reflection (Schön's preferred term), is summarized by Nolan (1989) in the following way:

> The coach encourages teachers to reflect on their own practice, to make explicit to themselves what they are seeing, how they interpret it, and how they might test and act on those interpretations. To be successful, coaches of reflective teaching must carry out three independent but closely related tasks: (1) make sense of and respond to the substantive issue of learning and teaching in the situation; (2) enter into the teacher's way of thinking about the substantive issue, tailoring their descriptions, language, and demonstrations to their sense of the teacher's understanding of the issue at hand; and (3) do these things in a way that makes defensiveness on the part of the teacher less likely (p. 35).

The coach (researcher) enters into a collaborative process with the practitioner creating a "hall of mirrors" to illustrate the process of reflection. Schön stated, "Both the reflective teacher and the reflective coach are researchers in and on practice whose work depends on their collaboration with each other" (p. 26).

In engaging in reflective practice with the teachers and principal at Sabal Palm, I wished to bring us together into a symbiotic, interdependent, and mutually beneficial inquiry (Cole, 1988). I found that such an inquiry required a tremendous time investment that could only begin when a trusting relationship was developed. In August of 1990, I began visiting the school two to four times weekly. I spent time conversing with teachers, sitting and observing in their classrooms, "hanging out" in the faculty lounge during lunchtime, and attending each faculty meeting. In November, I also began meeting with the principal from one to two hours on a bimonthly basis. During the first months of our collaboration, I attempted to move from a Sabal Palm "outsider" to a Sabal Palm "insider" by offering assistance in investigating areas that I didn't know much about, having a mailbox placed in the school right along side the faculty for easy communication, and joining faculty at social engagements. Generally, my behavior at meetings was characterized by listening more than speaking, and asking more questions than giving answers. I felt these actions played a key role in building the trusting relationship that would enable me to take on the role of reflective coach. Time passed quickly as it was not until five months later, January 10, 1991, that we began to meet as a collaborative group to discuss possible actions for change.

I did not find the physical time commitment to building a relationship with the teachers and principal at Sabal Palm a surprise. The surprise came with the realization that although I focused so intensely on having the teachers and principal trust me, that was not

enough. In order to coach reflection, I needed to trust the teachers and principal in the same ways they needed to trust me. At times, our reflections would create personal turmoil. I needed to trust that this was a necessary part of the change process (Red & Shainline, 1987) and that the turmoil created would not discourage the practitioners from continuing to engage in our research. I needed to trust that it was appropriate for me to be the catalyst of turmoil, and to be immersed in turmoil myself at various times during our research. I needed to trust that it was acceptable to say to the teachers and principal, "I am with you, I am one of you, and I allow myself to be confused when you are confused, which sometimes takes very little effort" (Schön, 1991, p. 356). I needed to trust that in sharing my thoughts and interpretations of events as we worked together, that I would not offend them, as Barth (1990) reminds us:

> The scholar who checks findings with schoolpeople risks offending teachers [and] principals . . . whose perceptions of reality are invariably violated by the researcher's account -- any account. [Yet] the researcher who does not convey findings to the adults in the school risks joining the tainted cadre of outsiders who take advantage of schools for their own professional purposes and run, leaving behind little benefit to the school in return for the precious energies that practitioners have invested in the study. (p. 87)

An additional aspect of reflective coaching that was surprising was that through the process of becoming a reflective coach of the faculty at Sabal Palm, they became a reflective coach of my practice as a teacher educator. This coaching was unintentional on their part, but as I engaged in discussions with these teachers and principal about their practices, I could not help but reflect more critically on my own teaching at the university, and began to make changes in my course syllabi, as well as my instruction at Florida State. Sharing these changes with the teachers and principal at Sabal Palm further facilitated the process of reflection. Our relationship now developed into a kind of reciprocity, described by McElroy (1990) as "not perfectly balanced, which might imply an equilibrium throughout the time. Instead, it [is a relationship] where each of us took total responsibility for [ourselves] and the relationship, each alone, living collectively. Further, balance would imply a static state and this relationship [is] forever shifting" (p. 212).

As we began our second year of research, our relationship shifted once again. I was assigned an 11 hour teaching load along with additional administrative responsibilities at Florida State. Although my intent was to continue working intensively with the Sabal Palm faculty, I found that physically, I could no longer devote the amount of time I had spent with the faculty the previous year. By visiting once a week and attending faculty meetings when my teaching schedule allowed, I discovered that the process of reflection and change was continuing at Sabal Palm without me. This is one goal of collaborative action research and reflective practice:

> In a collaborative self-study, a Hall of Mirrors unfolds. The researcher wants to conduct with her partner a collaborative inquiry into the ways of thinking, knowing,

> and understanding implicit in their patterns of action. She intends, at least in part, to help them learn to conduct this sort of inquiry for themselves; she must therefore be able to live out with them what she wants them to learn to do. She is personally on the line in a special way. (Schön, 1991, p. 355-356)

As previously stated, at times during our work together, the change process itself was painful and both the practitioners and I needed to trust that this was a necessary component of the change process. Yet, as I began to realize that the faculty at Sabal Palm was indeed living out the process of reflection, growth, and change without me, I began experiencing a pain unlike those we had encountered in the change process during the previous year. On November 22, 1991, I began sharing some of my feelings with the teachers, and on that day wrote the following response in a dialogue journal I had kept with the principal since our research began:

> Now a little caveat. It's been interesting for me this semester . . . this year at Sabal Palm as we've begun our second year of research.
>
> One of my goals as the university researcher who "adopted" this school is that you continue on your own . . . you all continue the process of reflection and change without me.
>
> I'm discovering that as this second year of research begins . . . that you are doing that. This is VERY EXCITING but at the same time, I'm experiencing a sort of empty nest syndrome. I find myself wanting to be a part of it all, when the truth is you don't need me anymore.
>
> This is wonderful! But at the same time, I miss not being there. Funny, is this how a parent feels when their child enters kindergarten? Or gets a drivers license? or leaves for college? This is really an interesting twist in my reflections. One I didn't expect (Dialogue Journal Entry, November 22, 1991).

I expect our collaborative relationship will continue to shift as we move on to new challenges in the future. As I reflect on the nature of our evolving university school collaboration, I realize that at some point, our relationship moved from professional to personal. In essence, we became "a family for change." Although our professional relationships will continue to shift as we move on to new challenges in the future, we have established personal friendships that are likely to last a lifetime.

From my experiences with the teachers and principal at Sabal Palm, I have learned that building collaborative teams of teachers, administrators and university faculty has tremendous potential to affect educational change and reform. The building of such teams may mean that the traditional relationship between the university researcher/teacher educator and school practitioners may need to be reconceptualized. Such a reconceptualization involves not only the investment of time, but the investment of emotions as well.

The Teachers.

Nancy was "the expert" from the university who was going to have all the answers -- even to problems we hadn't ever had answers to! At first, we looked at our collaboration as a chance for someone from outside the school to come in and solve the problems for us that we hadn't been able to figure out (such as room arrangements conducive to cooperative learning). Over time we discovered that although she quickly brought materials in to help us with these problems, she would not offer "tried and true solutions." The solutions to our problems would come as a result of opening up to one another, discussing, investigating, and learning together.

Perhaps the real "help" from the university began when we started engaging in dialogue journal writing with Nancy. This created the opportunity for us to really open up to each other. It was at this point that the idea of "empowerment" came about. The six teachers who were working on this project began to see just what we as teachers have the power to do. We met bimonthly to share with one another. Through our discussions over a period of time, we became convinced that we could make changes, that each one of us could make a difference through our one on one contact with other faculty members. We had moved from learning *from* "the outside expert" to learning *together* through sharing with one another at our collaborative group meetings.

Because we were able to express ourselves more during our meetings, our solution to what we thought was our biggest need surfaced. Our school has always been a tremendous family whenever a personal crisis has occurred. The faculty has stood by each other through major illnesses, tragic accidents, family deaths and divorce. No one could ask for better friends. But -- when we get to the professional areas of our lives, a different scene appeared. We believed that if we could create opportunities for small groups of teachers to share professional ideas and discuss professional issues at faculty meetings similar to what our small collaborative group was engaging in, we could build a professional "family" atmosphere to augment the personal family spirit at Sabal Palm. We split the faculty into small discussion groups of 5 or 6 for 5 to 10 minutes of each faculty meeting, and then let each group elect a spokesperson to share aspects of their discussion with the entire faculty.

Throughout the year, many faculty meetings were utilized for small group sharing. This time meant that each member of the faculty was asked to change their traditional role from passively listening to others talk at them to actively engaging in professional conversations with their peers. Some teachers viewed the sharing sessions in a negative way (i.e. "This is one more thing I have to do," and "We could finish with the faculty meeting earlier if it wasn't for the sharing.") Yet, over time, we began to see great benefits from sharing time (stress relief for faculty members; better understanding of others' perspectives, more collaborative working relationships with one another, and introduction of new pedagogical practices into individual classrooms). Therefore, our collaborative group decided to fight the negative comments with positive comments. We helped each other keep a positive focus. As we realized that being able to vent problems, discuss solutions, and share

new ideas in our collaborative group setting was energizing us to keep a more positive focus with other members of the faculty, we realized that a positive focus, a "can do" attitude, was empowering in itself. As individuals and as a faculty, we became more willing to risk and reach out. Yet, we discovered the importance of patience . . . as self improvement means change and risk, and this comes slowly, and is an individual decision.

The Principal.

When I accepted the opportunity to assume the role of principal at Sabal Palm Elementary School in April of 1987, I knew I would be facing the greatest challenge of my professional career. However, almost five years later, I would say that the countless situations I have had to work through have exceeded even my expectations of difficulty and adversity. And yet, it has been during this fifth year that I have seen "flowers" of success and achievement spring up from seeds planted and nurtured some time ago. The success and achievement has come to the Sabal Palm family . . . its students, faculty, staff, parents, and community and is not a prize claimed by any individual member. Sabal Palm opened its doors to students at the start of the 1962-63 school year. I was a sixth grader at an elementary school in Florida myself that year. The same principal served Sabal Palm for 25 years, until his retirement in 1987. His longevity of service at one site provided consistence and reliability to a school that witnessed many changes in the school community and society at large over a span of nearly three decades. My first principalship was to be at a school that had only known one principal. A school that was so favored by many community members that they had returned after growing up and beginning their adult lives in order that their children could attend Sabal Palm too.

I had developed a personal vision of what a good school would look like but I knew that in order for any real changes to be made, the faculty and I would need to work together . . . as a team. The great adventure was beginning and I was prepared to be a learner as well as a leader.

There were many surprised looks during the summer of 1987, when I announced that our interview/selection team would identify the best art teacher available for our students. The teachers needed assurance that my vote would count the same as theirs. The responsibility for the final decision was shared by each member of the team. The end result brought an outstanding art teacher to our school who is currently realizing a goal of teaching in a general education classroom. She has been selected by her peers to be Sabal Palm's representative for a "Teacher of the Year" recognition program, a tribute to her excellence in the classroom! I have continued to use this method of hiring not only faculty members, but staff members as well. The vast majority of faculty and staff members who have joined us during the past five years have been invited through the team approach to hiring. Many heads are better than one because the choices have improved the learning climate at Sabal Palm each time.

There were many more changes that I wanted to make but somehow I was unable to hear my own voice. It was at the conclusion of a workshop in June of 1990 that some very special contacts were made with a researcher/teacher educator at Florida State University that would provide the next level of our school improvement. For me personally, the reflective practice that Nancy Dana and I began during the 1990-91 school year enabled me to clarify my vision and set a course of action with follow-up and feedback through continued reflective practice. These sessions provided me the opportunity to explore the feeling of isolation in the principalship. The empowerment of teachers through participation in decision making is one way to weaken the feeling of being isolated and strengthen collegiality and trust among teachers and administrators. Teachers and administrators working together with a facilitator from the district office revised the special areas schedule implementing some marked changes from schedules previously used. The ownership of that schedule by everyone has resulted in a willingness to make the schedule work at least until the next opportunity this spring when a committee will work on recommendations for the 1992-93 school year.

I want to work in a school where everyone is excited about learning, especially those assigned to instructional positions. In my personal vision, teachers are learners too. I am a learner as well. Roland Barth's work has helped me in understanding and refining my personal vision (Barth, 1990). I wanted our faculty meetings to provide a culture for an exchange of ideas, a sharing of professional experiences, and opportunities to play the role of teachers as learners. To do this, I had to support the notion of these meetings belonging to the teachers. I had to be careful of silencing teachers voices by the clamoring of my own. Through reflective practice with Nancy, I was able to change my role during these meetings and become facilitator and learner. It is when I am the least involved in these faculty meetings that I feel they flow the best. I become more relaxed, more aware of the interactions of the teachers, and I feel like a colleague rather than an outsider. A sense of pride comes over me when faculty sharing sessions are buzzing with interest and involvement. I feel like a parent who has provided those initial steps of the process and then steps back to marvel at what the child can accomplish on their own. I believe we can only become better for the clients we serve by actively helping one another grow professionally.

Summary and Implications

In this paper, we have shared three individual perspectives of our attempt to create a culture for change and professional growth at Sabal Palm Elementary. In order to create such a culture and engage in collaboration with one another, we each reevaluated and reconceptualized our traditional roles as university researcher/teacher educator, teacher, and principal. This reconceptualization of professional roles as well as the professional school culture, came as a result of reflection in and on our practices as educators.

The metaphor of family was used in each of our individual stories as a referent to make sense of the experiences of our collaborative endeavor. The university researcher reflected that the nature of the developing relationship between the researcher and practitioners at some point moved from professional to personal, creating a feeling of family.

When the practitioners carried on reflective practice on their own, this family feeling led to an emotional loss likened to the feelings of a parent when a child enters kindergarten, gets a drivers' license or leaves for college. In contrast to the use of the family metaphor to describe the movement from a professional to a personal relationship, the teachers wished to create a professional "family" atmosphere to augment the personal family spirit at Sabal Palm. This resulted in a reconceptualization of faculty meetings where teachers moved from "passive listeners" to "active discussants" of educational issues, thus supporting each other in professional as well as personal lives. This change in faculty meetings led the principal to a role change from directing to facilitating faculty meetings. Successfully facilitating faculty active involvement in meetings became analogous to a parent providing the initial steps of a process and subsequently stepping back to "marvel at what the child can accomplish on their own."

In conclusion, from our experiences of collaborative action research, a family metaphor appears to be a viable referent to explore the issues inherent in building university school collaboration, as well as establishing a school culture for change. The caring and support system built into the image of family may be essential to university/school collaboration, school self improvement, and ultimately educational reform.

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